

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The Prairie Naturalist

Great Plains Natural Science Society


12-2016

Review of *Birds of Montana* by Jeffrey S. Marks, Paul Hendricks, and Daniel Casey

Scott G. Somershoe

United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Lakewood, Colorado, scott_somershoe@fws.gov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tpn>

 Part of the [Biodiversity Commons](#), [Botany Commons](#), [Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Commons](#), [Natural Resources and Conservation Commons](#), [Systems Biology Commons](#), and the [Weed Science Commons](#)

Somershoe, Scott G., "Review of *Birds of Montana* by Jeffrey S. Marks, Paul Hendricks, and Daniel Casey" (2016). *The Prairie Naturalist*. 9.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tpn/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Natural Science Society at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Naturalist by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Birds of Montana. Jeffrey S. Marks, Paul Hendricks, and Daniel Casey (Sponsored by Montana Audubon). 2016. Buteo Books, Arrington, Virginia, USA. 659 pages. \$75.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0931130-19-9.

The *Birds of Montana* is an impressive-looking tome, that includes 659 pages, 155 color range maps, 73 illustrations of species, and 16 color photos of Montana's habitats. Upon the first bend of the binding, the reader will quickly realize the impressive depth of detail and research that went into writing and completing this book. Although Montana is the fourth largest state, one of the least populated states, and has few "binoculars on the ground", the state has a fascinating and extensive ornithological history. The *Birds of Montana* is not a field guide, but rather it is an astonishingly comprehensive reference of Montana's rich ornithological history that includes a compilation and review of countless bird records and approximately 2000 cited references. After a quick skim through the text, it becomes apparent that the authors have set a new benchmark for this type of ornithological review.

The introduction chapter includes background information on the official state bird list, the Montana bird records committee, how the authors evaluated bird records, sources of data, and definitions used throughout the species accounts. The chapter not only provides important information on the authors' approach to the book, its content, and caveats, but it also sets the stage for the remainder of the book, with an easy to read and entertaining writing style. I have a penchant for bird records, and I found the content of this potentially technical chapter to be quite palatable.

The first three chapters provide concise, yet thorough, information about the diversity of ecoregions and habitats, ornithological history, and the conservation estate in Montana. Readers who are not intimately familiar with the diverse habitats across Montana—and may only think about the greater Yellowstone area, Glacier National Park, or the eastern plains in Montana—will be captivated by the chapter on habitats. This chapter and its stunning photographs may even stir the travel bug in some readers.

Admittedly, I have never been especially enthused by the history of early ornithology, but I caught myself completely entranced as I read the entire second chapter entitled the "History of Montana Ornithology." The chapter does not focus solely on specific individuals and their travels, but rather highlights the development of various expeditions and the trials and tribulations encountered in exploring the rugged Montana wilderness in the 1800s and continues through the contributions of modern ornithologists. One of the highlights in the book are the numerous stories of how various species were first documented in Montana and the stories of how some species that were new to science (i.e., type specimens) were collected and named.

The heart of the book is the extensive species accounts, which provide an impressive amount of content and detail for

all 433 species that have been documented in the state. The accounts not only include expected content (e.g., distribution, subspecies information, habitat, and status and occurrence), but the authors also went into great detail on conservation status, historical information, and contemporary research and conservation actions for many species. The section on banded birds and longevity notes was especially interesting. The species accounts are not just an overview of the basic status and occurrence information found in similar books for other states or regions, but the inclusion of non-traditional sections provide a much more complete picture of the knowledge of each species. I came across a handful of amusing stories in the historical sections, which provide levity in a book that could potentially drown a reader in details; these narratives did not detract from the value and genuine merits of the species accounts.

The book is full of excellent content, often backed up with numerous references. Some minor omissions, however, detract slightly from the content of the book that likely would not catch the eye of most readers. For example, I would have liked more explanation of where noted subspecies occur or breed in Montana, how these subspecies are separated geographically, and where overlap in their distributions may occur. I greatly appreciate the continuous paragraph format throughout the species accounts, with little to no wasted space on any page, but a list of the records for vagrant and casually occurring species would have been much easier to read than including those records in paragraph form. A significant effort was undertaken to compile individual records for various species, but I feel the information was a little lost in the text. Along those lines, I would have liked to have seen high counts and early and late occurrence dates listed separately rather than in paragraph form. Overall, these minor criticisms are insignificant and do not detract from the quality of the book. In a project of such significant undertaking and depth of detail, one would expect some minor oversights, omissions, or other individual preferences by the reader. Given the massive undertaking to produce a book of this quality and detail, I would not expect frequent updates of this book. However, I hope the authors find a way to make this book into a living document, with periodic updates on occurrences of vagrant or casual species and other notable changes in abundance, distribution, or conservation status.

The *Birds of Montana* is an incredible compilation of information on Montana's birds and extensive ornithological history. I enjoyed reading the introductory chapters and many species accounts, and I was never disappointed in the book's ease of use or the quality of its content. The book will become an essential resource for professionals and birders of all experience levels with an interest in Montana's avifauna. I recommend this book to everyone who has an interest in the birds of Montana and to those who have only a general interest in birds.—*Scott G. Somershoe, Landbird Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Bird Program, Region 6, Lakewood, Colorado 80225, USA.*